



East St. Louis landmark celebrates a centennial

By Andrew Theising

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East St. Louis is a city of change. Industry that once ran around the clock is gone. Jobs that were plentiful now are few. Population that once numbered more than 80,000 is now less than 30,000.

Amid all the change has been a constant: the presence of the federal courts in downtown East St. Louis. It was a great day in East St. Louis when the federal courthouse opened for business. It was dedicated to public use on Oct. 25, 1909, by President William Howard Taft.

On Oct. 30 this year, the federal courts and government officials will observe the building's centennial, and this ceremony gives occasion to reflect on all that the old structure has endured over the last century.

The day of dedication was called "Celebration Day," and the highlight was a grand parade proudly promoting the many products made in the city, everything from large industrial output to the crafts of family businesses.

The parade route stretched along Missouri Avenue, past a reviewing stand filled with dignitaries, as well as the new president (who had only been in office seven months). Taft's arrival was, in large part, a matter of good fortune and circumstance. He already was planning to be in St. Louis to accompany a flotilla of dignitaries on a cruise of Mississippi River down to a Deep Waterways Convention in New Orleans.

Many presidents and prominent figures have passed through East St. Louis, starting with Benjamin Harrison on a horse-and-buggy tour of the city's only paved street in the 1890s to Bill Clinton's economic development speech at 25th and State streets in the 1990s. Most, though, took advantage of the layover of train traffic to make speeches from the backs of railroad cars.

The designation of East St. Louis as a location for the federal courts was undoubtedly because of the successful lobbying efforts of William Rodenberg, a Congressman and a prominent face in southern Illinois politics beginning in the 1890s. Like his successor,

for whom the courthouse is now named, Mel Price, Rodenberg knew how to "bring home the bacon" to his district.

A rare old photo of the building's cornerstone ceremony shows rugged men standing around an unfinished foundation, holding the tools of their trades and banners of their organizations. It is a reminder that, even then, these public projects were about creating jobs. Their work was quality and has withstood the test of time.

Since its dedication, the old building has been enlarged, extended and doubled in size. It remains an imposing presence at the corner of Missouri Avenue and Eighth Street. It serves the southern part of Illinois and practically is in sight of its sister courthouse in downtown St. Louis.

The facade still is majestic. The U.S. General Services Administration has been a good steward of the historic building, and the federal government never gave up on its host city. In St. Louis, the federal courts have had at least three homes over the last century, but in East St. Louis the courts have remained steady and strong on Missouri Avenue.

The federal courthouse remains an economic presence, even though most of the law offices that used to surround it have moved on. It remains a historical marker, harkening back to a time when the many now-vacant buildings around it teemed with professionals and clients. It remains a force for justice, even when it is sentencing the leaders of its host city. The old courthouse lends a measure of dignity and prestige in a place where sometimes both are in short supply.

East St. Louis has changed drastically over the last century. Factories have come and gone. Organized crime had its rise and fall. Night spots still exist, but not like they did half a century ago. No longer do the stockyards butcher for the region's tables. No longer can a dozen languages be heard in the streets. The trains don't run like they used to. The cars don't stop here anymore.

The federal courthouse has withstood it all. It is a survivor. In a city where social injustices thrive, justice still stands on Missouri Avenue.

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